DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 112 TM 860 203

AUTHOR Prakash, Madhu Suri
TITLE Minimum Competency Testing--Grading or Evaluation?
SPONS AGENCY Ford Foundation, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (69th, Chicago, IL, March 31-April 4, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Academic Standards; Accountability; Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Grading; *Minimum Competency Testing; Remedial Instruction; *Student Evaluation; Testing Problems; *Test Use

ABSTRACT

The consequences of the minimum competency testing movement may bring into question the basic assumptions, goals, and expectations of our school system. The intended use of these tests is the assessment of students; the unintended consequence may be the assessment of the school system. There are two ways in which schools may fail in the context of the use of these tests: (1) inappropriate use of the tests; and (2) the school's inability to fulfill their goals, despite appropriate use of minimum competency tests (MCT). If quality education is defined as student input, then schools can use MCT to grade students and provide quality education. However, if quality education is defined as realizing student potential, then using MCT to sort and grade students does not fulfill schools' claims of providing quality education. However, MCT can be used in schools to reflect the modern role of responsible responsiveness towards students. Such a use would involve testing for the purpose of evaluation to ascertain the type of remedial help required by students. Remedial help appears to take on significance in the proper use of tests within the institution's current goals and past developments. (PN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING--

GRADING OR EVALUATION?

Madhu Suri Prakash
The Pennsylvania State University

ED267112

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. S. Prakash

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

TM 860 203

MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING--

GRADING OR EVALUATION?

The public scrutiny and scathing criticism of schools occasioned by the national reports, including those of the Commission on Excellence in Education are likely to direct renewed attention towards the adoption of minimum competency tests. And the consequences of the minimum competency testing movement may bring into question the most fundamental or basic assumptions, goals and expectations of our school system. Although, so far, the intended use of these tests is the assessment of students, the unintended consequence may be the assessment of the school system. For, these tests could reveal whether schools have failed or succeeded. If it is ascertained that schools have failed, what may next be queried is whether the failure is excusable. This will involve deliberation about the nature of the school systems' goals. Questions about the (social) significance and attainability of these goals may, consequently, arise.

In order to support the above conjectures, however, one needs to briefly examine two things. First, one needs to see what distinguishes minimum competency tests from the other tests that have been and are being used in schools. This will help to reveal why these tests could have an impact on the most fundamental policies of the system. Next, one needs to clarify what is meant here in talking about "school failure" and "school success."

TM 86 203

Research for this paper was funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

The policy to test students for minimal competencies is meant to ensure, by and large, that each student being graduated or promoted has some required minimum level of knowledge. Minimums on these graduation tests are supposed to be defined in terms of what every adult must know in order to be a fuctional member of society. This policy is, essentially, a response to the catastrophe of a large number of students graduating who are illiterate and, therefore, believed to be lacking skills necessary for functioning competently in today's society. Such a catastrophe, it is explained, has resulted from the prevalent school practice of "social promotion," the practice of promoting students merely because they have attended class regularly during the school year.

But, despite the agreement that the problem of illiterate graduates exists and needs to be dealt with, there is a great divergence of opinion around the move to test. This movement, in fact, arouses both rabid fear and great approbation. However, a movement cannot be fully understood and adequately assessed without account being taken of the goals of the institution adopting or recommending it. Therefore, a judgment of whether or not our fears about testing are well grounded, or our approbation justified must at least take into account the goals of the school

system. Further, these goals will also help one to assess whether student performance on these minimum competency tests imply the success or failure of schools. It is of import to note, however, that there are two ways in which schools may fail in the context of the use of these tests. The first failure may come about because of inappropriate use being made of these tests--appropriateness or inappropriateness of use being entirely a function of how conducive the particular use is for the achievement of the goals of the school system. The second sort of failure may result from the school's inability to fulfill their goals, despite the appropriate use being made of minimum competency tests. It is failure in this second sense which may necessitate a change in the system's goals, aspirations and expectations.

Testing is, in itself, neither desirable nor undesirable. What testing means is a function of how it is used. And, further, it would be illegitimate, if not plain hasty, to condemn or approve a use, as well as the consequences of making such a use of tests, without taking into account what we intend to achieve with the help of testing.

Clearly, one of the ways tests can be used is for grading. In such a case, the sole purpose of testing is to ascertain which students should be promoted or graduated and which should not. As long as the tests are fair, or valid, there is nothing inherently wrong with such a use

being made of tests. In fact, if our primary and only interest is a "meritocratic" system of promotion and graduation, a fair test for grading is to be positively applauded.

But, in the very statement of the merits of grading, we sense its inappropriateness within the American context. For, although American schools are expected to be "meritocratic," they are also meant to be much more. What is involved in this "much more" is, I think, brought out by the comparison that Ralph Tyler draws between school goals in the past and the present. Ralph Tyler notes that "in the past the schools sorted their students, giving failing grades to those that had difficulty in learning and encouraging those who learned easily. Those who received low grades soon dropped out of school and found jobs requiring little education. Most of the other students graduated from high school." In contrast, "This practice is no longer acceptable . . . [And] young people are urged to stay in school and the school is expected to find ways of teaching children who do not respond to traditional school practices."[1]

Now, if the sole, and not merely primary, principle in the operation of schools was that only those who have proved their abilities go on to receive education at the next level, one could turn all one's attention to devising a successful test for grading. But, if we are opposed to

schools being sorting systems; and, if it is true that using tests for grading students is using tests as sorting devices, then it would be self-defeating and inconsistent to use minimum competency tests for the purpose of grading students. In fact, it would mean that the schools have failed--that is, they would have failed to devise a policy for testing, which is consistent with the goals of the system.

What is needed, then, is a way of using tests which will be consistent with the new role adopted by schools. The new role, as Coleman[2] points out, no longer involves passivity on the part of schools in the education of the young. Its previous passivity lay in the fact that all it did do and was expected to do was provide exposure to a particular curriculum or program. The responsibility lay with the student to make what he could of himself given this exposure. Today, roles are somewhat reversed. Schools, and not students, are the irresponsible failures if a sufficient number of students are not responding well enough to the curriculum or program they are exposed to. If a particular curriculum does not lead to learning, then the student does not fail but the curriculum gets revised. The right curriculum is the successful one, where success is measured by real student learning. And, it is the school's responsibility to ensure that if a sufficiently large number

of students are not responding to a curriculum provided so far, alternatives will be investigated and provided.[3]

The observation by both Tyler and Coleman about the changing roles of schools seem to be more than amply substantiated by the number of alternative pedagogical movements that have sprung up and subsided in the last six or seven decades. One curriculum has been replaced by another, sometimes simply because such a change was considered good for all. In other cases, however, curricula have been offered in addition to the existent variety so as to achieve a best-fit between different student groups and the techniques with which they are taught. Consequently, today's fare includes not only the "regular" public school, but the fundamental alternative on the one hand, and the free school alternative on the other. These alternatives do not exhaust the list of options either. The hope is that if one teaching approach fails, something else will work. The assumption is not only that something will work, but that something has to work.

There is more than one set of reasons available for explaining the changing roles of schools. But, also, there is more than one way of describing its change of roles. It is not only the case that schools have moved away from being mere passive providers of a curriculum to becoming actively responsible for the student's performance; but,

further, the nature of their [activ] responsibilities has also gone through a transition. An[d], it seems fair to say that the transition has involved th[e] schools becoming more, instead of less, responsible. This has come about, in part, because of social pressures. Some [o]f these pressures involve changing expectations of the educat[ional institutions, such that once a goal is successfully ac[hieved, it becomes encumbent upon the institution to repeat its performance. This seems to be the principle of rising expectations at work: what has been achieved, can and must continue to be achieved; at the same time, new goals are loca[ted further afield for the institution. Green calls this t[he principle of the transformation of (attained) goals [nto functions of the system. He sees it as a "direct cor[ollory of the analytic principle that nothing can be a goal if it is already attained."[4]

The expansion in the school[']s responsibilities is reflected in the fact that in the pa[st few decades it had to focus only on the goal of minimiz[ing the number of drop-outs. Today, however, in addition t[o this function, schools also need to see that all those who [to stay on in the system get a quality education, quality being defined in terms of actual student learning or performan[ce. And, in this case too, the changing of a goal into a f[unction of the educational system has resulted from its [relative success in

achieving the goal of minimizing rates of dropouts or maximizing the number of students who stayed on for twelve years of schooling. Green[5] describes this transition as a movement from attainment to achievement. His description seems to bear similarities to Coleman's observation of a shift from an emphasis upon inputs to one upon the outputs of schooling in the achievement of equal educational opportunity.[6] The shift to outputs or achievements is a logical outcome of, if it does not actually define, the nonpassive roles of the schools today.

The following cannot be over-emphasized: if quality education is defined in terms of hours of exposure, qualification of teachers, students-teacher ratios (all inputs), then schools can quite consistently use minimum competency tests to grade students while at the same time providing a quality education. But, if quality education is defined as success in realizing student potential, at least in achieving a minimum; and, if it is further assumed that almost all children are capable of learning certain minimum skills; then, using tests to sort and grade students does not make much sense for schools claiming to provide a quality education. In fact, it is a step backwards if educational institutions today do start sorting and grading students with the help of tests.

Minimum competency tests can, however, be utilized in schools to reflect their modern role of responsible responsiveness towards students. Such a use would involve testing for the purpose of evaluation. The sole motivation for assessing the abilities of students would be to ascertain the type of remedial help required by students who "haven't yet made it" in order that they can, over a span of time, be taught and helped to "make it."

No one need deny that it is a harder proposition for schools to use tests for evaluation than it is for them to use tests merely for grading. But, if both the explicitly stated goals of schools as well as the path taken in the development of the educational system reflects the enlargement of the school's responsibilities, one would be hard pressed to explain a retracing of steps now. It is also true that remediation is going to become even more of an issue if lacunae of learning are explicitly identified through minimum competency tests. But, if funding for remediation is not forthcoming, the alternative to turn to is not grading. The latter would be one sort of response. But it can hardly be considered the appropriate response by an institution claiming responsibility for the provision of an adequate curriculum. Further, if most of those who do get "sorted out" are minorities or children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds,

to test in order to grade would involve taking away with one hand what is being proferred by the other as the promise of equal educational opportunity.[7] Remedial help thus seems to take on significant importance in the proper use of tests within the institution's current goals and past developments.

However, let us imagine the following grim scenario: the school system is unable to provide the requisite remedial help for bringing up students to at least the minimum standard required for promotion or graduation. Immediately we seem to be between the horns of a dilemma. For, to not test students is to push them along irresponsibly from one level of schooling to another. On the other hand, to grade them is either to openly admit failure at providing the type of schooling that realizes each student's potential, at least to a minimum level; this will mean that the school system has failed to achieve its goals. Or, it is to give up the assumption that every child can learn the skills necessary for being a functional adult in society and, that he has a <u>right</u> to such an education.

The alternative of continuing the practice of social promotions becomes palatable only when compared with the option of denying a graduation diploma in an age and time when being without one is a veritable disaster. On the other hand, the grading alternative appears pragmatic when viewed

in the light of a set of conditions where, 1) having a diploma is no "big thing;" where 2) the only real use, in most cases, of the diploma is that it helps one to go on to the higher levels of the educational system; but, where 3) entrance to college is based on sorting and selecting. Consequently, it can be argued on the basis of this set of conditions, that instead of sorting out a student after having kept him in school for twelve years without having ensured that he learned, it is less cruel to sort him out of the system even earlier.

In the face of these options, the importance of providing remediation matches the necessity of testing. The other alternative is, of course, to shift radically away from the path of development that has defined the educational system so far. To take this alternative is for the system to admit failure in the achievement of its goals. There is, however, a viable way in which the school system could admit failure, and yet do so without any loss of face. Clearly, the viable way does not include an open, unqualified admission that schools cannot always be effective in teaching the three R's. Today, such a candid admission would be considered outrageous. For, over the last century and particularly in the last two decades, the public has developed a perception of what the school's role is--and, this role is seen as including at least the

function of successfully teaching the three R's to all of America's youth. In fact, the spokesmen for the school system have aided and abetted this public perception. The viable option, therefore, seems to be admission of failure, qualified by the plea that the necessary parental support has been missing. It is to assert that children cannot be motivated to use even the best of learning situations in the absence of the right sort of parental encouragement and aspirations. Thus, schools can maintain that children have been and are failing not because the schools have shirked responsibility, but because the family and society have refused to accept their share of the burden. One suspects not only that the schools may use this turn of argument to protect themselves from the outrage of the public, but that historically schools have made similar claims to their advantage. In 1876, an educational commentator alleged that "a large proportion of the pupils in our cities and populous towns come from homes utterly destitute of culture, and of the means and the spirit of culture, where a book is never seen and reading is with the adult members a lost art and one never acquired. . . . It seems almost impossible to give them [the pupils] a conception of either the uses or the pleasures of knowledge, or to lead them to that primal exercize of judgment by which two ideas are compared or combined. Even the simplest object lessons are often

unintelligible to them. Instruction can hardly be conveyed to them. . . ."[8] In the quotation, the students and families being blamed for the school's inability to teach were the poor immigrants. Katz, in responding to this commentary, claims that "if this essentially racist excuse for educational failure sounds reminiscent of contemporary discourse about cultural deprivation, it is not an accident. For, the contemporary notion is but a continuation of the old: a well developed bureaucratic strategy for explaining educational disaster by reference to the inferiority of the pupils."[9] This is not to alledge that the excuses in the aftermath of testing will be racist. In fact, it seems likely that they will not be, even though a large number of failing students will be minorities. One suspects that the scapegoats in the coming future will be the general public, or social features like the addiction to television-viewing.

The reminder that the situation concerns minimums, the very basics, will, one hopes, be a compelling force in rounding up the necessary support for remediation. For, both the options of not abiding by goals, or explicitly changing those goals are unfortunate when it means that many children may never acquire basic, survival skills. Such options only mean that a major social problem will continue to exist. Such options provide no real alternative solutions.

Footnotes

1. Ralph Tyler, "The Minimum Competency Movement: Origin, Implications, Potential, and Dangers," presented at Conference on MCT, held July 17-18, 1978, by Johnson Foundation and Kettering Foundation, Wingspread, Racine, Wisconsin.

2. J. S. Coleman, "The Concept of Equality of Educational Opportunity," Harvard Educational Review, 38 (Winter 1968), 7-22.

3. This would, it seems, particularly hold true if the students in question could be identified as a group, identifiable in terms of certain socioeconomic characteristics.

4. T. F. Green, "Minimal Competency Standards: A Systemic Perspective," p. 23.

5. T. F. Green, Book in Preparation, 1978.

6. In fact, it seems to me that one could describe both attainment and achievement as being parts of the emphasis on outputs. However, the shift from the former to the latter reveals an advance from an emphasis on one type of output to another.

7. This holds true only if equal educational opportunity is defined in terms of Coleman's outputs. We are led to believe by the author that such a definition is currently the accepted one.

8. A. P. Peabody, "The Relation of Public Schools to the Civil Government," The Unitarian Review, 6 (July), 24-39.

9. M. B. Katz, "From Voluntarism to Bureaucracy in American Education," Sociology of Education, 44 (Summer 1971), 297-332.